

How do you start an animal shelter?

At the Oregon Humane Society, we receive many inquiries and requests for help from groups wanting to start an animal shelter or humane society. There is no one method. It depends on the location, the likelihood for stable, ongoing resources, and the amount of support for such a project in your community.

Rather than tell you how we do things at OHS, we advise you to look to communities of similar size and determine how they managed to build and support an animal shelter. This may also give you an idea of how large a facility you need and a glimmer of how many animals you may receive yearly.

Remember, once you have a building in place, it will take an ongoing effort to keep it open. Providing excellent care for the animals in the shelter is one responsibility. Paying utility bills another. Paying staff is yet another consideration. Even the most dedicated volunteers cannot be expected to run a shelter 365 days a year and answer to the needs of the organization.

Keep in mind that the public has an expectation of animal shelters that is not always realistic. Once there is a physical shelter, you may be expected to take large quantities of animals that you cannot accommodate. The public must be educated before the shelter is even built especially if you offer pre-admission appointments, pre-admitting assessments of animals, and fees for service. Having a clear mission and explaining it well to the media and public will keep your efforts focused on what you can successfully achieve.

You may not need a building to achieve your goals! Before you decide you need a building to house unwanted animals, consider your options. Suppose you were gifted \$300,000 to help animals. That could build a modest shelter and maybe leave some leftover operation expenses. Or, it could provide citizens with grants to have their animals altered. It could pay for behavior training classes offered to the community in order to help sustain a loving relationship with their dogs. It could purchase a vehicle to transport dogs to other shelters with higher adoption rates. It could help establish a system of foster homes to care for and place animals through community events or the internet. Rather than paying for staff, insurance, and electric bills, you could use the money to directly help animals.

That being said, some communities truly want for a physical structure. It could be a leased portion of a boarding kennel or veterinary clinic. It could be a self standing shelter on land purchased for that purpose. Whatever it is, it must be able to be cleaned and maintained easily because you want your resources to go to animal care, not maintaining a faulty boiler or a leaking roof.

Where does the money come from?

The first thing to do, obviously, is raise money. There are some grants that provide money for buildings. Some provide money for specific programs. Very few provide money for daily operational expenses. You will need to have an infrastructure in place of donors willing to voluntarily provide funds on a regular basis to maintain the building and take care of the animals.

Once again, every community is different in their capacity to stay healthy and vital. Some have volunteers or staff run thrift stores that do an excellent job of providing daily capital. Some have yearly fundraising events that become part of the community social calendar. Shelters that have been in the community over time and have developed relationships have been the beneficiary of wills and estates. However, a new shelter will need to plan ahead with a realistic budget to determine where the money will come from. You cannot build a building and expect the money to come.

The good news is that there are many models and methods to study around Oregon and the United States. With diligent searching, you may find a similar situation that will provide you with the experience of their hindsight.

Some of the links on OHS shelter resource webpage are to national organizations. Examples of some of these are the Humane Society of the United States, The American Humane Association, and the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New York. These organizations have conferences, produce newsletters, websites, and chat rooms for people in the animal shelter industry. This enables you to reach large amounts of other like minded individuals with the same goal: to increase the quality of the lives of animals in their community. There is a wealth of information to guide you to success with your project.

When it comes to forming a shelter or advocacy group, there is no need to recreate the wheel. We are so lucky to have many wonderful models to evaluate and copy around the United States and Canada. Networking, visiting other shelters, and reading periodicals will give you a good basis for creating a mission statement and goals. However, remember that shelter personnel are very busy people. If you wish to take a tour or speak with different departments, it will save you time by calling ahead and making an appointment. It may be helpful to send questions about your interests ahead of time so staff can collect materials that will meet your needs.

Whatever you do, know your efforts will be considerable, but the impact on the animals in your community will be worth the effort. That is why it is so important to plan carefully and have the resources in place before you open the cage doors to the public!